

Tea party, union make strange bedfellows

By Brian Chasnoff

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These things happen, media outlets flubbing facts. After nine years in the business, I'm not one to judge.

This light flub is worth a mention, though, because it's actually enlightening. On Saturday, KSAT 12 covered the efforts of the San Antonio Professional Firefighters Association to derail VIA Metropolitan Transit's downtown streetcar system.

Firefighters that day went block-walking alongside streetcar opponents, trying to collect 20,000 signatures by this summer to force a vote to change the city charter. On camera, Association President Chris Steele echoed what he told San Antonio Express-News Staff Writer Vianna Davila earlier last week.

The city's "saying, 'We don't have enough money to add firetrucks and police cars and things like that,'" he said, "and so we have said, 'Who do you want to see going down your street, the police car and firetruck or a trolley car?'"

As Steele spoke, a banner appeared identifying him as "Jeff Judson: Tea Party Heartland Institute."

Let's spread that mixed fruit around for a moment.

The tea party is a movement of disparate groups fighting for limited government.

Olmos Park City Councilman Jeff Judson is a senior fellow and board member of the Heartland Institute, a Chicago-based nonprofit that calls itself a free-market think tank. (It's known for denying climate change.)

Judson has also tormented VIA, working behind the scenes to try to kill the agency's downtown transit centers and, most recently, seeking anti-streetcar support in Americans for Prosperity, a national conservative group that helped bankroll the tea party movement.

Such groups typically don't blend well with unions, particularly one preparing to battle

to keep as much as possible of its taxpayer-funded health coverage. The city and union are on the cusp of contentious negotiations over rich benefits for firefighters.

The televised flub, however, offers an impressionistic truth: These groups have become strange bedfellows united by a common enemy in city government.

Both factions have something to gain.

Anti-streetcar forces want voters to think opposition to the project transcends the tea party. Firefighters in the fray can only bolster that contention.

They also serve as a convenient foil.

On Saturday, anti-streetcar activists solicited signatures from Fiesta revelers at the King William Fair. One teenager identified herself as a firefighter's daughter.

"She said her father was going to lose his firefighter benefits," said one partygoer who signed the petition.

In turn, the fire union can cast city officials as wasteful spenders focused more on constructing "legacy projects" than protecting police and firefighters, who in turn protect the city.

On Monday, Greg Brockhouse, a spokesman for the fire union, did just that with the city's \$32 million commitment to streetcar.

"I think what's important is you realize where the city is spending its money — \$32 million of the city's money is still taxpayer money, and it's still money the city has available for basic city services," he said.

Do local firefighters actually dislike streetcar?

Without the potential project, would the local tea party still care about protecting the health care benefits of firefighters?

In a marriage this convenient, does it even matter?